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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the practice whereby the university teacher has sole power over judgments about doctoral student outcomes. The analysis is based on action research and a case study examination of one student's vive voca examination to transfer from the M.Phil to the Ph.D. program at Kingston University (England). In the examination process the stakeholders explored the value of collegiality which they sought to implement in their examination practice. An analysis of the transcripts of the examination process suggested that three dilemmas were central to a reconstructed notion of examination, including: (1) democratization of the process of examination; (2) conflicting research paradigms and the nature of the Ph.D.; and (3) the viva voce as a formative learning process for stakeholders in the examination. These three dilemmas are then used to address issues that arise between a supervisor and doctoral student, using a joint self-study conducted through a facilitated-memory work session. (Contains 43 references.) (MDM)

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ED 420 215

Using the M.Phil to Ph.D transfer viva as a focus for the collaborative self study of examining practices. Pam Lomax and Zoe Parker[1].

N. I'm quite bewildered by this idea that you can include the project of your research as part of the data for it, it's so cyclical, its like the snake eating its own tail and the faster it eats the smaller it gets.
P. That's why the auto-biography of learning is a key concept because once you use auto-biography, you follow the tail down the throat.
Z. It was why I called it embracing reflexivity.
N. Nature doesn't usually have the snake eating its own tail
Z. It doesn't but if it did its head could appear out of its arse and so it could see again.

The expression and recognition of diversity amongst researchers, particularly the growth of part time teacher-researchers, has led to territorial defensiveness (Hammersley, 1993), explanations of balkanization (Donmoyer, 1996; Smith, 1997) and some creative ways forward (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; Eisner, 1993; 1997; Evans, 1998; Lomax & Parker, 1995). The fact that this diversity amongst researchers has been mirrored in the doctoral student population, has received less comment. Elton & Pope (1989) noted the paucity of research based literature on doctoral study and its narrow focus on organisational matters. Recent debates about doctoral research in the UK show much the same limitation, concentrating on issues such as the low rate of completions. A popular explanation of low completion rates has been that doctoral students and their supervisors lack the knowledge and skills required to do research. A remedy which is strongly supported by the UK Research Councils, and being much debated and researched currently, is the provision of research training (Caras & Powell, 1997; Green & Shaw, 1997; UK Council for Graduate Education, 1997; Williams, 1997). This training is generally conceived in technical terms, focusing on such elements as "*how to identify main trends in the literature, how to examine the presentation of data, how to analyse others' work and how to structure arguments, how to extract information from selected sources, how to explain and justify the research design...* " (UK Council for Graduate Education Newsletter, 12 April 1997). Although these skills are important, they deflect attention from more essential qualities of doctoral work such as originality (Hockey, 1994) and the need for autonomous learning. We share the concern that "research students who have not become autonomous learners by the time they pass their PhD examination will not become researchers but only research assistants" (Elton & Pope, 1989:274).

The diversification of research has not been altogether a bad thing. It has been a useful incentive for challenging some academic practices, such as those that have legitimated a particular pattern of power between teachers and their students (Evans,1997; Evans, Lomax & Morgan, 1998). In this paper we question the practice whereby the university teacher has had sole power over judgements about doctoral student outcomes (Hughes, Denley & Whitehead, 1998) and suggest that students' different perspectives should be incorporated into an examination practice that is more collaborative (Lomax & Cowan, 1989; Lomax, 1994). Mutuality, the idea that students and their supervisors can engage in mutual learning through the research supervision relationship, is useful here (Elton & Pope, 1989). We wish to

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develop an examination process that fosters mutuality in learning opportunities. We believe that such a reconstructed notion of examination can lead to more just, moral and effective procedures and practices.

Our overall perspective is action research within the paradigm adopted by McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead (1996). This involves the idea that action research is collaborative, as participants are encouraged to be co-researchers; and participative, as the researchers investigate their own practices (Lomax, 1995). We intend our work to make a contribution to educational knowledge through the living theory approach (Whitehead,1993; 1995; 1997; 1998) which emphasises the contribution of practitioners who make their own process of education transparent.

The paper is divided into two main parts. Part one presents data concerning the transfer viva[2] of one doctoral student. In this specific examination situation, the stakeholders explore a value of collegiality which they seek to implement in their examination practice. An analysis of this data suggests three dilemmas which we see to be central to a reconstructed notion of examination. These are: *(1) democratising the process of examination, (2) conflicting research paradigms and the nature of the PhD, and (3) the viva as a formative learning process for stakeholders in the examination.* In part two we use the three dilemmas as a focus to address some issues in our own practice as a supervisor (P) and doctoral student (Z). In this we work from the perspective of joint self study of teacher educational practices (Hamilton, 1998; Lomax, Evans & Parker, 1998; Pinnegar & Russell, 1995; Russell & Korthagan, 1995; Russell, 1998). The joint self study is conducted through a facilitated memory work session. Memory work is a method for a collective investigation of experience, where an individual can draw upon her own experience in order to help another understand hers better (Crawford, 1992; Lomax & Evans, 1996; Haug,1987; Schratz & Schratz-Hadwich, 1995). Our discussion of these dilemmas is intended to inform the action research questions: How can we help stakeholders in the examination process work together to make the transfer viva a more positive, formative and educational experience in a student's research career? How can we help stakeholders in the examination process collaborate to clarify the criteria and standards to be used to make acceptable judgements about a student's readiness to transfer to Ph.D?

The Case Study

This case study draws on data concerning one part time doctoral student, Fred. Fred was the principal of an elementary school whose action research was focused on his leadership of his school during a period of uncertainty and change. He was enrolled as a doctoral student in the School of Education in September 1993. His research proposal was submitted to the University Research Degrees Committee in February 1994, and was accepted in April 1994, after he had carried out suggested alterations. He was ready to transfer to the final stage of

[2] At Kingston University it is normal for a part time student to register for a M.Phil degree with transfer to Ph.D possibility after a minimum registration period. A viva voce examination is held at the transfer point.

the doctoral programme in September 1995. His viva voce examination was held on the 12th September 1995 and it was recommended that he make some modifications to his report before submitting it in October 1995 to be considered at the November meeting of the University Research Degrees Committee. After making required modifications Fred was notified of his successful transfer at the end of January 1996 (School of Education Records).

The transfer viva is a *rite de passage* in the system operated in many Universities in the UK where it is normal for a part time student to register for a M.Phil degree with transfer to Ph.D possibility after a minimum registration period. In our case study context, the transfer viva is seen as a formative stage in the training process as well as a point at which the student must provide evidence that the research has the potential for the award of PhD. The transfer procedure involves the writing and examination of a substantial report and a viva voce examination.

Who were the stakeholders in this case? The viva voce examination was arranged by Polly, representing the department in which Fred was enrolled as a student. The viva panel consisted of Nigel, the student's director of studies; Jeremy, the external supervisor; Martin, the external examiner; and Polly. Arthur, a member of the University Research Degrees Committee also attended for part of the time and Prue, who interviewed Fred subsequently was present as an observer. Fred was invited to participate in all the discussions that might take place and tape recordings of all the discussions were to be made available to him. These stakeholders have been described in terms of the role they played in the viva, but as will become apparent, other factors were also significant.

The data upon which we base the case study analysis is taken from:
1. A brief pre-viva discussion between Jeremy, Martin, Nigel and Polly (tape1:1-184)
2. The viva voce examination which was attended by Arthur, Fred, Jeremy, Martin, Nigel and Polly (tape 2a:1-694 & 2b:1-289)
3. The post viva meeting of the panel with Arthur present (tape 2b:298-713) and after Arthur had left (tape3a:1-433).
4. A post viva interview with Fred (tape1: 190-xx).

For the purpose of this paper we have chosen extracts from the taped discussions that relate to the two broad questions outlined earlier. We use these extracts as critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) that enable us to address some of the *dilemmas* of the examination experience. We have used Richard Winter's idea of reflexive critique, in which alternative and contradictory explanations are sought, as a way of making our analysis more critical (Winter 1989). In addition we have used our preliminary analysis of the data as the focus for a two hour memory work session in order to draw upon our current relationship as doctoral student and supervisor. This has been integrated into the final part of the paper. We thank our colleague Nick Selley for his input to the memory work session.

Dilemma 1: ***democratising the process of examination***.

Extract 1 (Tape 1a)

Nigel .... [3] I am not happy with the idea that we should have no discussion apart from with the students because I think we have some things to say ... um ... we wouldn't be able to say with the students present - (1a:4)[4].

Nigel ... there are things I firmly believe about Fred's work so far ... um .... which I wouldn't at this moment tell him because it might be discouraging (1a:41).

Fred arrives for his viva. He is invited to stay, have coffee and join the discussion or go to the viva room. He chooses the latter and leaves.

Jeremy (....) If we are free and open about the fact that we are now working out procedures for ourselves - that is what the day is partially about....

Nigel ... yes ...

Jeremy .... do we invite professional colleagues to participate fully with us ....

Nigel ... um ....

Jeremy ..... to actually work out those procedures in a collegial way? (1a:163).

Extract 2 (Tape 2a)

Fred I don't mind my work being discussed by other students. I have no problem.

Nigel Good. That's the only point I had.

Fred I think we have had two years of discussing each others papers. I don't have any objections personally (2a:32)

Arthur arrives

Arthur May I say why I am here. Its partly to do with Polly's invitation and I am very pleased to do that ..... also .... to have a look at your procedures (....) which interest the University Research Degrees Committee ... and I am here to learn...

Polly One of the things we have decided is that we are here to learn - all of us, with the students - so it should be interesting.

Martin And one of the consequences of that is that we are trying to be as open as possible and make as much information flow as possible and Fred has access to the tapes and so does anybody else (2a:266).

Extract 3 (Tape 3a) *Fred and Arthur have left*

Martin The academic world has a lot that needs to be challenged and it doesn't get challenged.

Polly Well, I never know whether to challenge these things, or let them go through, because I don't want to stop some of the students . I mean, we put too many hurdles in the way (....)

Jeremy But I'll tell you what that doesn't do. That doesn't then enable the politics of education

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[3] .... indicates pauses or the beginning or end of an extract, while (....) indicates where part of the text has not been reproduced so as to make the paper shorter and more readable.

[4] This relates to the tape number and the location of the extract on the tape.

	that ought to be revealed (....)
Polly	But wouldn't it be so much easier to concentrate on being critical of the student, in an open way (....) without having to think that it might be held against them (3a:360)
Martin	Its quite alright that we have this discussion without Fred present. It is unfair to make it his problem.
Jeremy	I don't see why it's unfair (....) far from saying it's unfair, Fred is gaining through this in relation to this whole problem about legitimating the professional knowledge he's got. I feel that we are actually enabling him to see some vital relationships in terms of educational research and knowledge.
Nigel	Well, I'm really with you there. I think that in Fred's case he is not likely to be perturbed by anything (....)
Polly	Yes, but other people aren't like him (....) others might just give up (....)
Martin	I think there are certain times when people have got certain things on their mind when it's just not fair to give them other things to think about..... pragmatically.... not because it's certain kinds of knowledge... (3a:405).

The discussion began with the issue of whether the taped records of the day would be available to all the students who participated, and this became an issue to do with how much transparency there should be in the processes and procedures of judgements about students' work. There is a dilemma between Nigel's desire to protect his students' sensibilities from what he sees as the potential harshness of his judgement; Martin's concern about too much involvement imposing an unnecessary burden on students; Polly's pragmatic wish to get on with the job; and Jeremy's view that the process of judgement should be made transparent whatever the consequences. All of these conflicting views are underpinned by their own ethical and educational imperatives suggesting that it would be a mistake to think that consensus was possible or necessary. An interesting question that arises from this is how the degree of consensus or difference between different stake holders in the examination process affects the decisions about examination.

Nigel's position as the main supervisor suggests great sensitivity to the feelings of his students. He appears to hold a developmental perspective on the students' learning, where a student's potential is developed through careful nurturing and there is danger in giving too much critical feedback too soon. He is concerned that if all students have access to all the discussions between students and supervisors it could lead to students 'losing face' before their peers. His responses suggest a version of the tutorial relationship, "*a dyadic relation combining formal instruction and interpersonal support within a framework that is both demanding and caring .... the existence of intimacy, care and personal commitment on the one hand and commitment to specific academic goals on the other*" (Rapoport et al, 1989). Given this stance, greater transparency is seen as possibly damaging to the student-supervisor relationship, a negative experience for the student and destructive of motivation.

Jeremy, like Nigel, is also representing an educational perspective in terms of wanting to provide students with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the criteria for judging their work by giving them access to the process and procedures of academic judgement. This understanding may enable students to fulfil these criteria more easily or it may help students to

challenge unfair decisions and unfair institutional practices.

The views of Polly, as department head and Martin, as external examiner probably represent a balance between the conflicting demands of students and bureaucracy. They present a more pragmatic strategy to a problem with which they empathise strongly. This comes through in their shared view that some students cannot cope with the micro politics of their PhD as well as the research.

Reading between the lines of these different concerns, other issues emerge. Whilst all might agree that action to promote a more rational and just situation for the student is a good thing, focusing students on a better understanding of the politics of institutional judgements might result in deflecting their criticism from inadequate supervision or their own limitations. A more transparent system could be very threatening to supervisors. How healthy must the supervisor's practice be before opening out the process further? Would transparency expose vulnerability, diminishing supervisors' status as experts? Would it threaten loss of face? This is an important issue from the organisational perspective too, as opening out the examination process so that it is more transparent to the student may expose the organisation to litigation. The discussion between Polly, Martin and Jeremy (extract 3) is also pertinent suggesting that the academic world needs to be challenged, but that such a challenge might lead to unfortunate results for the particular students whose work is at the centre of such a challenge. In this respect it seems significant that members of the panel are powerless to change or interpret examination practices (official and informal) without the help of Arthur and Research Degrees Committee that he represents.

Fred links his openness to having his research discussed by other students to his experience as a research student in the School of Education, where such discussion has been the usual practice. Fred has a strong commitment to action research[5] and supports its principle of putting research into the public domain (Lomax, 1995). This does raise questions about how far the particular research culture within which Fred has worked has given him a confidence that others may not have. Is a commitment to openness more likely to be found in an action research community rather than other research cultures? Polly's observation that *'other people aren't like him .... others might just give up'* is pertinent here, and suggests that personal factors have a part to play.

In the post transfer interview, Fred is clear that the process of transfer is potentially educational for himself as an individual student. He says,

> *I didn't find writing the report arduous, and it wasn't threatening responding to Polly's comments on the first draft. Then Nigel's comments put a different line of thought (....) I liked writing the transfer report for my own peace of mind. If you are systematic it does help. I think this is a significant moment in my research. If the*

[5] Fred is an active member of the Kingston Hill Action Research Network which is part of CARN, the international network.

> *research is a tree which is bearing fruit in my school, now I want to look at the roots of that tree. (....) I didn't find the viva daunting in the least. I think that the make-up of the panel was just right, with Nigel, Polly , Jeremy and Martin being there. I didn't feel intimidated by anyone's presence. I can't expect to be at their level, I am happy to learn from it. I came here to learn. I came to the viva with the view that I was in a win/win situation .... if I get knocked back that would be ok, if not, great. I feel loyal to Polly and Nigel because they give me as much of their time as I want..... The viva is a requirement which matters politically and personally. If you get though it shows that you are on the right track.....I feel I might have contributed something that helps the group, given the way my first proposal was knocked back by the committee...* (Interview, 12.9.95).

The metaphor of the tree suggests a clear recognition of transfer as a rite de passage from the requirement for M.Phil *to critically investigate and evaluate an approved topic*, to the requirement for Ph.D *to critically investigate and evaluate an approved topic resulting on an independent and original contribution to knowledge*[6]. Fred also shows an awareness of the micro-politics of the situation, particularly in his view that what he learns may be beneficial for others in the research group. His appreciation of the viva panel, with its obvious eclecticism concerning matters of practice and principle, suggests either a diplomatic response or is an indication that students may have a greater capacity than their supervisors to accommodate conflicting expectations.

Dilemma 2: ***conflicting paradigms and the nature of the PhD.***

Extract 4. (Tape 2b)

Jeremy	What I always find impressive about Fred is the capacity (....) to actually learn from the experience of the critical discourse...so there is a criteria
Polly	....can they take on board the criticisms and be able to deal with them creatively.....
Jeremy	.... in relation to the recommendations...has the candidate satisfied the group of his or her capacity to conduct an enquiry at PhD level? (....)
Nigel	How does this strike you, Arthur, is it a dangerous notion or a clear reflection of the situation?
Arthur	I'm not going to prejudge any decisions being made...one of the features that I feel is very important (....) is to be confident that the person doing the research has looked at the database - whatever that database is - in a critical way...not just taking on board critical discussions (....)
Nigel	.... he has evaluated the quality of the data as well as just reported it?
Arthur	.... and that's your springboard for the PhD... that you have a database which has been critically appraised and critically sifted which acts as your springboard. The fact that you can take on board critical comments is commendable but it is not the basis for the transfer (2b:660).
Arthur	(....) I have this vision .... I tend to have in my mind .... of scientific papers or

[6] Kingston University Research Degree Regulations, 1998.

whatever, PhD theses, transfer reports...where there's aims, methods, results, discussion...and if you could in some way...and I'm not asking you to use that as a template yourself.... but if you could in some way think about that .... most people on the committee would have that in mind ..... (....) The process (....) of the research degrees committee is that the transfer report will only be seen by at the most two people. It's the report that the supervisors write which will be seen by all the committee members. And the two that are asked to read this will hopefully be selected from people who know something about action research (....)

Nigel That's very interesting because if this went to someone who is not familiar with this area of study, they might find it a bit daunting...

Arthur Hard to understand it, yes ... (2b:689).

Must there be agreement between stakeholders about the criteria and standards to be used in judging a student's readiness to transfer to Ph.D? What if stakeholders come from different research perspectives and value different and contradictory approaches? Arthur says: *there have been people on the committee who have looked very carefully at action research and who tried to understand it but who have failed to do so (2b:660).* The dilemma of applying criteria from an inappropriate research paradigm is illustrated in the discussion about the importance of critical discourse as a criteria to judge a students readiness for transfer. Although there is agreement that critical discourse is important and agreement that data should be critically appraised, there is no shared understanding of what this means. Thus Arthur is quite adamant that critical discourse should take a second place to a critically appraised data base. In action research, critical discourse can mean what Winter (1989) has called dialogical critique, which is the idea that as part of the process of action research, the researcher must integrate alternative explanations into discussion about all aspects of the research including plans, actions, analysis, interpretation etc. McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) take this a step further in that they argue such dialogical critique forms part of the formative procedure of validation which should be built into the research process. This is a point made by other critical theorists such as Kemmis and Carr (1986), who regard critical discourse as an imperative in improving the rationality and justice of the researcher's understanding of her own educational practices. Arthur seems to miss the point of interpretive research, where the data will always be problematised and the issue is less the objective presence of the database than its interpretation. Only Nigel intervenes at this point, with the pragmatic comment: "*if this went to someone who is not familiar with this area of study, they might find it a bit daunting....*

The dilemma for the panel is how to advise Fred in relation to finding an appropriate way of representing the action research. Representing it for transfer means presenting it in a form that can be understood by those making the decisions about transfer. While the viva panel are familiar with an action research paradigm, the University Research Degrees Committee are more comfortable with a tested and tried scientific model. Being a new university[7], the University Research Degrees Committee are reluctant to recognise the expertise of colleagues

[7] Kingston Polytechnic became Kingston University in 1992.

working within unfamiliar paradigms. For the viva panel it is the dilemma of 'authenticity' v 'pragmatism'; the dilemma of either satisfying the University Research Degrees Committee, with its predisposition for a scientific paradigm or using a language and form more appropriate to the type of research being conducted. This highlights the interplay of the political and the intellectual in determining the advice to be given to the student. Fred is aware of this dilemma and sees himself as a key player in supporting the 'home team'.

> *The procedures are an unfortunate way of doing things at Kingston because action research is unique. It's important that we dig in our heels and set the scene for future PhDs. It was good to have the University Research Degrees Committee representative there. I feel I might have contributed something that helps the group, given the way my first proposal was knocked back by the committee.* (Interview, 12.9.95)

Dilemma 3: ***the viva as a formative learning process for stakeholders in the examination process.***

Extract 6. (Tape 3a)

Nigel	Can I ask a question? A pattern, a structure .... I have seen for action research reports.... has been, chronological cycles in which everything has been fitted into ... I suspect forced into ... a pattern . Is that, in your view, a viable format?
Martin	I think it can be. Whether it is viable in this particular case, I am uncertain because in a way, we haven't explored that. And if we had that as a sort of construct in the earlier discussion we might have asked Fred questions about it. It hasn't actually arisen, has it? We've not seen it that way.
Nigel:	Fred, I think it sounds as if your cycles are all taking place at once because they are forced along by external events?
Fred:	Yes, and there have been some massive spin offs.
Nigel:	You've got a job to do. It can't wait while you complete your cycle and plan the next one.(3a:49)

Extract 7 (Tape 3a)

Nigel	The data collection stops long before you've finished writing.
Jeremy	No, no...
Nigel	It must because it takes a year for you to reflect on and collect the .....
Polly	Jeremy doesn't like this language, Nigel, because ....
Jeremy	I'm afraid to say .... I didn't like it much. The idea that the collection of the data abruptly stops and then the report is written seems to me not to appreciate that the very act of writing and reflecting is part of the data collection (3a:105)

At this point Fred leaves

Nigel	I had a very interesting meeting, for me, because I am being inducted into this[8], but I am very relieved to find that I have no conflict with either the methodology or values generally in circulation here.

[8] Nigel is relatively new to action research.

Polly I think your scientific, recent scientific background is actually very useful ...
Nigel I don't have any theory of the positivist that I think I can't live with.
Polly Yeah, but slowly ... I mean ..... I think you might be able to help more as you get more familiar with the action research .... to put it in a way that will be understandable to the other side which I have failed to do. Actually failed.
Nigel Do you think so?
Polly I think so .... (3a:282)

The dilemma is not simply to do with the panel versus the research degrees committee. Panel members also appear to have their own agendas. For example, Nigel introduces the issue of action research cycles. Martin points out that Fred has not discussed this in his report and neither was this issue raised in the viva. But Nigel persists, addressing Fred directly, "*it sounds as if your cycles are all taking place at once because they are forced along by external events*". Fred replies "*Yes, and there have been some massive spin offs*". But Fred's response, which appears to agree with Nigel's possible criticism, is actually presenting his own different formulation of what he has done. Fred's formulation draws upon McNiff's work (1988). In this model of action research, simultaneous cycles are not a problem. One may start off in a reasonably clear cyclical pattern where each cycle builds upon the previous one. However, after a time other lines of enquiry into one's practice present themselves. The cycles have side cycles spinning away. Sometimes these side-cycles form their own series; sometimes the side-cycles feed back into the central set. Fred is so familiar with this model that he does not explain to Nigel what he means. He does not unpack his theorising. It seems that none of the panel actually hear what Fred has said, which is that it is the action research in response to external events, rather than the external events, that drives the research.

So who wins the more combative bits of the discussion? There is certainly dialogue and this appears to soften individual attitudes. Can this lead to the adoption of more rational and just working practices? Most of the stakeholders paid lip service to the idea of being learners, but how much was this formulaic rather than real? There is little evidence of Jeremy, Martin or Polly reframing their learning (Schon, 1983) to accommodate apparently conflicting viewpoints. There is not an instance where a panel member says emphatically or unequivocally: *I've never thought about that before, I really learnt something new there*.

Nigel, as a new supervisor, shows a remarkable willingness to learn. He is willing to shift his perspective; he frequently weighs a matter up, makes or retracts a decision and changes direction. For example, Nigel says that he is moving into consideration of ideas from a new paradigm, and that neither the methodology nor the values conflict with his existing views. He says, *I don't have any theory of the positivist that I think I can't live with* (3a:282). Further evidence of his willingness to reframe and accommodate new ideas can be found in relation to his willingness to listen to the advice of the more experienced action researcher Jeremy, when he says that *the act of writing and reflecting is part of the data collection* (3a:105). There is also the example of Nigel's insistence that action research cycles should be discussed, not in relation to Fred's agenda but in relation to his own newly emerging understanding of action research. (3a:49). These examples suggest that Nigel, working from his intellectual position as a Science educator, is testing the new action research frame against his existing frame,

seeing where it could fit and how he could accommodate both ways of thinking. This ability to accommodate is also apparent when he considers adopting the structure for research reporting which Arthur from the RDC has suggested, but he is cautioned against this by Jeremy, Martin and Polly, who are all more experienced in the action research paradigm and less willing to accommodate Arthur's suggestions (3a:13).

What are the chances of potential learning transferring into the institutionalised context? Did Arthur go away with a better idea of action research than he had before. Did Polly gain more insight into the dilemmas of the research committee than she had before? And what about the most important stake holder, Fred? It seems that the students agenda is often ignored and that of panel members taken up. Whose PhD is it anyway? Fred is doing a PhD - why? What does he see as the value of such an undertaking? Is the panel helping him to achieve his aims? Should they be? Fred is trying to get a PhD which you could call X. He sees it as X, is willing to work hard under difficult circumstances to get there. Whatever X is he obviously values it. Fred is also willing to fight the power structures hard to get his X as evidenced by the way he approached his briefer on the University Research Degrees Committee and negotiated the revisions he was being asked to make. He had a bottom line which he stated publicly. He would not go along with University Research Degrees Committee advice that compromised his values[9]. But the panel probably saw Fred's PhD as Y and a completely different animal to X. Y may have some of the superficial characteristics of X and vice versa but they are fundamentally different undertakings. X is important to Fred as a professional educator. Y is important to the panel in terms of their definition of doctoral research. Can the two be brought together or will Fred end up having to do Y? How democratic would that be?

What can we learn?

We used the dilemmas identified in the case study as a focus for discussing our own experience as a supervisor (P) and doctoral student (Z) within our university context. We found it difficult to focus on our own practice and our recorded conversation frequently moves back to the powerful case study data. We also found it difficult to stand back from the values and practices to which we both subscribe and which are embedded in this research, so that we have not done full justice to the way in which these can be used as criteria against which we judge our action research.

We find the view that adult learners have a right to be treated as autonomous learners (Elton & Pope, 1989) to be particularly pertinent given the increase in the number of professionals who are part time doctoral students. The fact that we are colleagues as well as supervisor and student is an added incentive to our commitment to the shared value of democratising knowledge and breaking down unnecessary status differences between us. This is not simply a matter of possible friendship but relates to a view of colleagueship that we both endorse. Inviting Zoe to play a fuller part in her own examination gives her part ownership of the

[9] In advising Fred about changes he was being asked to make to his original proposal his supervisors had suggested that he might modify the action research method he intended to use. His response was that this would compromise his values and he was unwilling to proceed in that fashion.

process and is motivating. It is a step towards making the procedures more transparent so that judgements can be debated and we can both learn from this. Does this mean that either or both of us must engage in the micro-politics of knowledge? Is there a moral imperative if we both seek to make the system more just, moral and effective?

P: Given that you are a mature professional person I think that you should be involved as fully as possible in all aspects of the process and procedure of your research degree.

Z: Jeremy says that it is important for students to have an understanding of the political context and the struggle .. well my point is that if there was openness then its up to the student. I prefer openness. I would prefer to know that there are political debates going on and I would prefer to understand them as far as I can in my own context. But I choose whether or not I am going to engage in these political issues.

We both agree that we need to problematise the process of democratisation. Elton & Pope (1989) suggest that there are conditions necessary for extending collegiality to research students. They think that students and supervisors need to be matched for personal and academic compatibility and that it needs to be done within the context of a research community. These conditions seem sensible given that the difference between supervisor and student is often one of differential power within an opaque process. Filer, a research student, warns of the danger of one way dependency relationships between supervisor and student and suggests that co-action and mutual support in a peer group of which the supervisor is one amongst many is the best way to collegiality (Filer, 1994). We work within such a research community and have both contributed to its ethos of support and critical feedback (Lomax & Parker, 1996).

We also recognise that there are differences between us, as student and supervisor, that are based on an authority of experience (Russell, 1995) which is not equally shared. The case study data questioned the robustness of some supervisors' authority when opening up their judgments to their students who are being judged. Nigel was reluctant to share all his judgements with Fred, fearing that this would interfere with their relationship of trust. Pam is strongly committed to openness, but she is reluctant to engage too deeply in an emotional and counselling role. Wilson (1980) reports that new PhD students expected far more from supervisors in the emotional and counselling context than supervisors felt willing to give. To what extent can the different dimensions of the supervisors role be separate? Could all supervisors cope with making their judgements more transparent? Would it expose too much vulnerability?

Z. It's the disclosure that is important, not the vulnerability. The dilemma is that in doing something which we believe to be valuable, that is disclosing for the sake of better communication and collaboration, we inadvertently make ourselves vulnerable. I was asked to go to Oxford to talk to the education students about what it was like to do my Ph.D[10]. I said that it felt like a struggle and there are times when it was difficult and there were times when I could not write - and I felt quite vulnerable to do that. I went and did that presentation as personally and honestly as I could. I got a very warm response from the students

[10] The title of Zoe's Ph.D is *An action research approach to the experience of studying for a Ph.D.*

who said that I had helped them to get a better perspective on the difficulties of doing their own Ph D work. It wasn't that I was making myself vulnerable, it was that I was opening out the process.
P. Does showing me your writing make you feel vulnerable?
Z. No. I have a block because I don't share your way of judging things or I don't know - I can never predict what you're going to say about a piece of writing that I do. I don't particularly want to predict, but with you I find it particularly difficult because I feel you're going to come at it from some angle which is not where I wrote it from. It's more than writing, though, because I know that I have had an issue about speaking in seminars and in tutorials. It's more than the written word, its about presenting the other person with your ideas and what you know. Maybe its me. I don't see it as making myself vulnerable, I see it as something else.

Generally the processes of academia are not transparent and examination judgements can only be questioned by students on procedural grounds, particularly once they are enshrined in a university bureaucracy. Neither of us think that this is fair to students. But would it be fair for students to receive the fullest possible criticism of their work? One student reports: "*The critical dimension that my supervisor brings is pervasive and represents a constant challenge to my thinking. In the early stages I would have found too much criticism unsettling, needing time to come to terms with the uncertainties...*" (Fraser, 1994:311). Could greater fairness impose a burden that is in conflict with the idea of a *duty of care* towards students. Caring should not be overlooked, but there is still a danger because "*..the boundaries which chart the limits to the supervisors intellectual and counselling responsibilities are not clearly defined. The result is a black hole into which the parties may plunge and in which there is always potential for the autonomous originality of the students research to be compromised by too much intellectual and emotional involvement by the supervisor*" (Hockey, 1994:302)

The rationale for the case study was partially located in the need to influence the micro politics of a new university, historically attuned to scientific research paradigms, so that educational action research was recognised as a legitimate research paradigm. The problem was not only about democratising or opening up the process, but of finding ways to tighten up the process so that the 'non believers' might be convinced. Existing tensions and disagreements with the University Research Degrees Committee were de-motivating for both students and their supervisors and resulted in unwarranted interruption to students' progress.

Z. Being asked to respond the research degrees committee was like - you have worked quite hard inside your paradigm and you have understood and you have made your relationship with your supervisors and you have discussed what you are doing and you feel quite secure and then there is a sort of Kafkaesque thing where somebody else with a completely different way of viewing it can push it one way or the other. I thought that they were asking me to do unacceptable things. For example, I was told to engage in a particular text and I felt that was quite inappropriate. That might have had to do with my view of having some sort of freedom of intellectuality or creativity in doing my Ph.D.

Zoe's last point relates back to the purpose or nature of a PhD. Is it a technical training aimed to produce technical competence in the application of research techniques or a philosophical education aimed at enabling students to question a range of means in relation to a desired end? The university's own definition of Ph.D, inherited from the CNAA, sees it as '*an independent and original contribution to knowledge*' and not as a technical training in research methods. In

this context, how one represents the research is crucial to its significance. The debate about conflicting paradigms thus becomes fundamental to a concept of the nature of the PhD. Both Jeremy and Martin, the external members of the viva panel, are both clear about this point, Jeremy saying, "*I'm really curious about aims methods, results and conclusions (....). I am worried in terms of that language in that form because of where it is coming from ... It seems to me that, that is a positivist tradition which is not appropriate for interpretive research and educational action research ...*" and Martin supports him saying, "*Let's play with it for a moment: aim, method, results, discussion. Uh. I think, Nigel is right, we could sort of respond to that, but I think it is not appropriate in the sense that this does seem to me to be a scientific paradigm and I think we are working in an interpretive field.....*" (3a:13).

The case study was not intended to research the practices of the research degrees committee, although we have found it necessary to consider the impact of their practices upon supervisors and students. The research degrees committee itself represents diversification and the politics of this have in themselves resulted in a challenge to certain academic attitudes and practices. Inviting Arthur to participate in the viva, was a way of re-assuring him about the procedures, at a time when merely stating these procedures seemed insufficient. The outcome was that he seemed happy with the procedures but unsure of the paradigm and therefore suspicious of the judgements. The fact that the viva panel included two academics from outside the University, both with track records of supervision and examining in the appropriate field did not seem to reduce this suspicion.

P: I think it is important that the research degrees committee monitor the work of individuals, both the supervisors and the students, but it seems that the individuals who get that job often do it from their own prejudices rather than in the spirit in which it has been built into the regulations. The problem is that we have got a situation of peer review and the peers do not always recognize the diversity of paradigms - that's what I feel. Now I am not sure whether there is a better system than peer review.

Conclusion

The purpose of this enquiry has been to explore a *reconstructed* notion of examination so as to find more just, moral and effective procedures and practices.[11] One of the tenets of action research practice is that such enquiry allows the emergence of our own living theories. The collaborative method of the action research, which encourages us to make imperceptible changes in our own interpretive frames, supports the development of this living theory and through this can influence our individual educational practices. Given this view, how optimistic are we about achieving change that results in more just, moral and effective procedures and practices? Could our method encompass all the stakeholders in an examination process? Would it be possible for them to participate in dialogical critique within the process of the examination itself? Could critical discourse be part of the formative process of the examination as well as part of the documented process of the research? These are unresolved dilemmas. What do they mean for us as educators? How much do we need to move towards

[11] As a result of this study several procedures have been implemented so as to make the transfer viva more transparent.

resolving them? Are they healthy matters for deliberation, to hold in mind? If we resolve them does the snake swallow its tail?

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